

10 Steps to Better Discipline (2005) Johnson, L. Wiley, CA, USA

good starting point. It will give you a solid basis and will provide opportunities for you to practice and evaluate different techniques.

1. Ignore the Offender

Often students act out just to gauge the teacher's response. If you are easily upset, flustered, or angered, they will take advantage of your short fuse. On the other hand, if you ignore mild misbehavior, it will often go away.

A student may whisper the F-word under her breath, for example, just to see if she can make you blush or yell. If you pointedly ignore the behavior, the student may get the message. If she does not, then you have many options, depending on the student. This approach sends a new, stronger message: this is my classroom, and I will decide when and how I respond to student behavior.

2. Send Nonverbal Messages

We all respond to body language. In fact, most students of human behavior agree that 80 percent of our communications are nonverbal. Take advantage of this powerful tool by using eye contact, changes in your voice and posture, and gestures and movements to alert students that they are approaching a danger zone. Above all, keep moving. Teachers who rove around their rooms experience far fewer behavior problems because students automatically react to the distance between them and the teacher. If this distance changes at random, students are much more likely to monitor their own behavior.

3. Drop a Behavior Card

Because so many students are visual or kinesthetic learners, they may not respond to verbal requests. Or they may forget a few seconds after you have reminded them to be quiet or sit down. Using colorful index cards that you can easily locate and retrieve in class, create some behavior cards.

For young students, write this message:

Stop and think.
You need to be more polite.
I will talk to you about this later.

For older students, write this message:

Your present behavior is not acceptable.
Please be more polite.
Return this card to me—in person—after class.

When a student begins to disrupt your class, walk past and drop a card on his or her desk. In most cases the student will stop the current behavior. Leaving the card on the desk serves as a visual reminder for students who tend to forget. Collect the cards after class if you teach multiple subjects or at the end of an activity with younger children. When you collect the cards, thank the students for choosing to behave and cooperate. (If you drop a card and the student ignores it or throws it on the floor, see the next step.)

4. Have a Quick Chat

If nonverbal signals and behavior cards fail to motivate your student, ask him or her to step outside the room. Don't worry about the other students. They will be interested in seeing what happens, and although they may make a little noise while you are in the hallway, they will be quiet when you return. (If a student becomes nosey and asks questions, invite that student to step outside. He may decline the invitation, but if he does step outside, out of curiosity or belligerence, treat him the same as your original disrupter.)

Ask your student if there is a reason for his or her disruptive, defiant, or disrespectful behavior. If there is and it's reasonable, figure out a way to address it. If the student can't offer a reason, ask the student if you have somehow offended or insulted him or her. If you have, apologize and offer to shake hands. If you haven't, tell the student that it is time to think. Here's the warning speech I make (you may choose to change the wording for younger students, but the gist of the message should be the same):

You have the right to fail my class. If you truly want to fail, then I would like you to put that desire into writing and sign it so that I can keep it in my file to show you and your parents in the future if you question your grade. If you don't like the activity I have assigned, I'm sorry; but I am the teacher, and I chose that assignment because I believe it will teach important information and skills. You don't have to

do the assignment. You have the right to sit and quietly vegetate if you truly don't want to do the work, but you do *not* have the right to interrupt my teaching, stop anybody else from learning, or waste everybody's time with obnoxious disruptive behavior.

Ask the student if he or she feels ready to come back to class and cooperate. If so, shake hands and get back to business. If not, it's time for the next step.

5. Take a Time-Out

Leave the student standing outside your door (or in the back of your room, if you have small children or a strict policy that would prohibit having a student stand in the hall temporarily). Ask the student to consider his present behavior and whether or not he wants to continue. Go quietly back into your room and give the student time to think about his behavior. Occasionally step outside to see whether the student is ready to talk to you. If not, leave him there. If necessary, leave him there until the end of the class period or school day. Tell him you are trying to help him be a more successful student and person. Remind him that if he runs off, you will have to refer him to the office as being truant and then the matter is out of your hands. If he doesn't run off and doesn't talk to you, let the matter drop and see what happens the following day. Often students will pretend the entire incident never happened. You can then do the same.

6. Call the Culprit

One evening after a particularly trying day, I called the father of a student who had tried to drive me crazy by whistling softly at a very high and annoying pitch for ninety minutes in my classroom. Father wasn't home, and junior answered the phone.

"You know who this is?" I asked.

"Yes," he whispered.

"I was very disappointed in your behavior today," I said. "I like you, but I don't like the way you acted. It was very annoying, and it disrupted my teaching. It's important to me to be a good teacher. I don't want you to do that again. All right?"

"All right," he said.

He never whistled again, and I began calling students directly to discuss their behavior. In most cases those phone calls were much more effective than calls to parents, because the students were entirely responsible for their behavior. Often

when the student behavior improved, I did call the parents—to tell them how much I enjoyed having their child in my class.

7. Sign a Contract

Just as behavior cards serve as an effective visual reminder to students who forget verbal instructions, student contracts serve as effective written reminders to students who have promised to cooperate. Your contract doesn't have to be elaborate, and it doesn't have to be a form. Some teachers use a form on school letterhead to make the contract look official; all they have to do is fill in the blanks. Other teachers ask the student to write out an agreement about what behaviors will improve and what consequences the student will suffer if he or she breaks the contract.

Just as positive reinforcement produces quicker and more lasting results in behavior, positively stated contracts result in quicker cooperation and a better relationship between student and teacher. Instead of listing things the student won't do, list things the student will do. And if possible, incorporate some reward—not a bribe—but something such as, if the student does not break this contract for thirty (or sixty) days, the student will earn ten points for good conduct and this contract becomes null and void. Think about how much more responsive you would be if a traffic officer gave you thirty days to prove you could drive safely instead of issuing you a ticket.

8. Send for Reinforcements

Sometimes even the best teacher meets an immovable student. If the first seven steps fail, and the student still causes major disruptions, don't waste time blaming yourself. Clearly, the problem is bigger than a simple personality clash or routine misbehavior. Send for reinforcements. Call security to escort the stubborn student to the principal's office. Meet with your principal and ask for suggestions and support. Call parents and request a conference. If parents or guardians are unhelpful or a key element in the student's problem, see if you can find an adult relative, such as an aunt or uncle. Check with the bus driver and your school security personnel to see if they have managed to create a good relationship with the student. Talk to your school counselors and psychologists and ask them to talk to the student and suggest alternative approaches for you to try. Ask a coach to counsel the student. If your community has a mentor program, see if the student has a mentor. If not, put in an emergency request. (And if your school doesn't have a mentor program, write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper and ask community organizations and businesses to sponsor a mentor program.)

9. Request a Transfer

If your school is large enough to have another teacher at the same level, see if that teacher would be willing to accept the student as a transfer into his or her class (of course, you and the other teacher can't make this transfer yourselves, but if both teachers agree, the office will be much more likely to cooperate with your request).

At small schools where a transfer is not an option, you may be able to find a fellow teacher who also has a problem student. Offer to switch students for a specified period of time each day, to give yourselves and students a break from each other.

10. Remove the Perpetrator

You may be stuck with an incorrigible student for any number of reasons: a small school with limited options, lack of administrative support, undue parental influence in the community, inflexible guidelines from your local school board. If you have exhausted every avenue and a student continues to disrupt your teaching and other students' learning, then you need to remove the student from your classroom—unofficially. I have used this method successfully myself, and I have recommended it to other desperate teachers, who report that it worked for them.

First, create an assignment folder for your troublesome student. Include the next two or three assignments that you intend to complete during class and a brief but complete description of any special activities or projects. Next, talk to your school librarian and ask whether you may send a student to do independent work as long as that student does not misbehave in the library. If the librarian agrees, explain that you will give the student a pass each day and that the student is to ask the librarian to sign the pass and indicate the time that the student enters and leaves the library. (In schools with no library or no cooperative librarian, find a counselor, coach, administrator, or teacher who can supervise the student and agree on a time period and location for this experiment. If no other location is available, place a desk outside your classroom door and have the student sit outside and do his work. If he leaves the desk and wanders off, he is now in violation of your school policy, and you must refer him to the appropriate office.)

Do not make any preface or provide any warning. Simply call your student aside, hand him the folder, and explain that he will be completing his work independently. Provide an instruction sheet that states your expectations about conduct in the library, the procedure for getting his passes signed, and his responsibility for returning the completed work to you at the end of the class period each day. Do not

argue with the student. Hand him the folder, show him the door, shut the door, and teach the students who cooperate. If your troublesome student decides to take a vacation, simply fill out the proper reports and let the discipline system handle him. If he complies with your instructions, continue this policy for as long as necessary. Once I had to remove a student for an entire quarter, and I'd like to add that the day I reached the end of my patience and removed him from the class, several students stopped by individually to thank me for removing the troublemaker and making it possible for them to learn.

Of course, there is a chance that your administrators (or sadly, your fellow teachers) may object to your emergency independent-assignment procedure. If that happens, explain (and follow up with a letter summarizing your conversation to cover your back in case somebody decides to file a report at your district office) that you exhausted every legal option and the student still made it impossible for you to teach and other students to learn. Provide dates and times when you asked administrators for support or assistance, copies of disciplinary referrals, minutes from any conferences, and dates and times of phone calls or meetings with parents.

IF YOU MUST HAVE DETENTION, MAKE IT WORTHWHILE

Some schools insist on having a detention center, and many schools require that teachers take turns supervising detention. If that's the case in your school and you can't convince your administrators or fellow teachers to try a different approach, then do your best to make detention useful. Instead of simply enforcing a no-talking rule or overseeing time-wasting activities, find some interesting articles—interesting to young people, not necessarily to adults. For example, my students have responded enthusiastically to critical reviews of popular movies; feature articles about sports stars or musicians; essays about controversial subjects such as UFOs, tattoos, and body piercing; pop psychology quizzes; self-help articles on handwriting analysis, dating success, anger management, ways to stop bullies, and so on.

Don't make your reading assignments mandatory if you have a room full of little rebels. Just pass out the papers and say, "Here's something interesting we could read." Then give them a few minutes to look it over. Read a little bit out loud. Some students will follow along. If anybody seems interested, ask for volunteers to read. If nobody volunteers, read the entire article aloud yourself. Encourage the students to discuss the article, but if they prefer to remain mute, don't take it personally. Detention rooms may have some nasty bullies among the crowd, and many students